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AUTHOR Davis, William E.
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ABSTRACT

School psychologists' expertise and services have been important in student identification and program eligibility for students with disabilities. During the early 1990's, several factors, conditions, and trends suggest that special education will soon undergo seminal changes and psychologists must stand ready for this transformation. This paper identifies and analyzes selected conditions, controversies, and trends--in the field of special education and U.S. society as a whole--which will profoundly influence the future of special education in the nation's schools. Student enrollment in these programs has increased dramatically and with this expansion come issues of costs, defining at-risk students, the role of the Regular Education Initiative, and other important issues. Discussed with these conditions are the attendant changes in the roles and responsibilities of school psychologists along with recommendations on how they can become most effectively involved in special education's transitional period. Psychologists can help educators sort out many of the critical issues involving the complex relationships between students identified as having traditional disabilities and those students who do not qualify for special education services but who still are considered to be at risk. (Contains 36 references.) (RJM)

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ISSUES AND TRENDS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

William E. Davis, Ph.D.

Professor of Special Education and Director
Institute for the Study of At-Risk Students

5766 Shibles Hall
College of Education
University of Maine
Orono, Maine 04469-5766

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ABSTRACT

School psychologists traditionally have played an extremely important role in the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs designed to serve students with disabilities in our nation's public schools. In particular, the expertise and the services of school psychologists have been utilized within the student identification, program eligibility determination, and instructional planning domains. However, during the early 1990s several factors, conditions, and trends, both within and outside of the field of education, suggest that the "face of special education" likely will look much different in future years. In turn, it is suggested that the roles and responsibilities of school psychologists as related to special education issues and practices in our future schools also will witness substantial changes.

This paper has three major objectives: (1) to identify and analyze selected conditions, controversies, and trends within both the field of special education and broader United States society which are likely to serve as major pressure points in shaping the future of special education in our schools; (2) to discuss how the roles and responsibilities of school psychologists are likely to be impacted by these projected changes; and (3) to offer specific recommendations relative to how school psychologists can become most effectively involved in the transitional period that special education presently is experiencing -- one which is suggested to become even more dramatic in terms of change during the late 1900s and early 2000s.

ISSUES AND TRENDS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

School psychologists traditionally have played an extremely important role in the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs designed to serve students with disabilities in our nation's public schools. In particular, the expertise and the services of school psychologists have been utilized within the student identification, program eligibility determination, and instructional planning domains. However, during the early 1990s several factors, conditions, and trends, both within and outside of the field of education, suggest that the "face of special education" likely will look much different in future years. In turn, it is suggested that the roles and responsibilities of school psychologists as related to special education issues and concerns in our future schools also will witness substantial changes.

Growth of Special Education

Since the passage in 1975 of P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), the number of students enrolled in special education programs has increased dramatically. During the 1990-1991 school year, 4.8 million students (11.7 percent of *all* students) received special education instructional and supportive services under P.L. 101-476, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (formerly EHA) and Chapter 1 of the Elementary and

Secondary Education Act, State Operated Programs, representing a 29.9 percent increase in the number of students served since 1976-1977 (U. S. Department of Education, *Fourteenth Annual Report to Congress*, 1992).

Several observers have suggested that a *special education backlash* has been growing throughout our nation in recent years. This backlash generally has been attributed to two major factors. First, the costs of special education programs often are viewed as being "excessive." Second, because these programs are federally mandated and, therefore, normally not as susceptible to the same level of budget cuts as other non-federally-mandated programs which have taken place in recent years, some believe that special education programs are, in fact, taking away needed programming services from "regular" students (Bracey, 1991; Gough, 1992; Lewis, 1991; Presser, 1992; Zirkel, 1990).

Current Issues, Controversies, and Trends

The perceived "excess cost" issue represents just one of several concerns and controversies which currently are involved within the field of special education. Our nation's special education system presently finds itself in a transitional period. It is struggling with some basic identity issues. In brief, the field is attempting to determine what its appropriate role should be in a widely recognized changing educational system -- as well as in a projected dramatically different overall human services delivery system for our nation's children and families.

Among the many contemporary issues, controversies, and concerns involving the field of special education, several of them are suggested to be of particular interest to school psychologists, and they will be addressed in this paper. Clearly, because of space limitations, only a very cursory discussion of these issues can be presented. However, they are intended to serve as a catalyst for further in-depth analysis by school psychologists.

At-Risk Students and Special Education.

There has also been a great deal of concern generated by the recent major interest in *at-risk students* in our current and future schools. While there is lack of agreement relative to precise definition of *at-risk*, there *is* widespread agreement that large and growing numbers of our nation's children and youth are in jeopardy of not only educational failure but also of broader, long-term social and vocational failure -- and that their numbers will grow substantially in the future (Children's Defense Fund, 1992; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1993; Davis, 1993; Davis & McCaul, 1990, 1991; Hodgkinson, 1992; Kirst, 1991; Kozol, 1991; National Commission on Children, 1991).

What will the *impact* be upon education, in general, and special education, in particular, of the expected substantial increase in the number and proportion of *at-risk students* who will be entering our future schools: poor children; children representing ethnic/racial minority groups; those children with major health problems and developmental disabilities who can be expected to live longer than those youth in the past who had similar disabilities; children from

increasingly diverse family configurations, e.g., single-father and single-mother families, children living in gay/lesbian families, and so forth?

Also, what about students with HIV and AIDS? Crack-addicted students? Youth who are victims of child abuse and neglect? Homeless and latchkey children? Will *special education* be viewed as the primary placement and instructional vehicle for these students -- or will *regular education* assume increasing administrative, programmatic, and fiscal responsibility for them?

"Regular Education Initiative" and "Full Inclusion"

What complicates this issue even further at the present time is the unknown impact that the *Regular Education Initiative (REI)* may have on the future of special education programs in our schools. The REI debate has been receiving varying degrees of attention since the late 1980s as part of our nation's broader educational reform movement.

The REI controversy focuses on the purported advantages and disadvantages of the establishment of a unitary educational system which, in effect, would largely abolish the current special education system as we presently know it. Regular education, then, would assume the primary, if not exclusive, responsibility for the education of students with disabilities in our schools (Carnine & Kameenui, 1990; Davis, 1989, 1990; Davis & McCaul, 1988; Jenkins, Pious, & Jewell, 1990; Lieberman, 1990).

The current REI controversy, irrespective of its ultimate fate within the policy arena, does raise some interesting questions relative to the future of special education in our schools -- especially in light of the anticipated influx of "new" at-risk students who will be present in the years 2000 and beyond.

For example, despite the concerns being raised relative to the excessive costs of special education, *will special education be viewed as being even more necessary in the future* should most of the "new at-risk students" (e.g., drug-impaired students, HIV/AIDS students etc.) be categorized as *special education students* ? Thus, conceivably under these circumstances, special education as a field could witness an even greater degree of growth than it has in the past twenty years.

Or, conversely, should regular education -- for any number of reasons including the need to substantially reduce fiscal expenditures -- make a convincing and strong argument that "these new students" as well as many others with "substantial non-educational" problems should *not* be the responsibility of *education* at all, the entire special education system as we presently know it could be drastically altered.

How will the future costs of admittedly expensive special education programs be handled? Should *education* be expected to share the full costs for these students, especially for those children whose "primary problems" appear to be based within traditionally *non-educational* domains, e.g., mental health or social services?

Intrinsically involved with the Regular Education Initiative debate is the contemporary *full inclusion* movement. While both the

concept and the practice of *full inclusion* are being interpreted quite differently by regular educators, special educators, parents, and school psychologists alike, this particular topic currently is generating widespread controversy among these groups. In brief, the central issue involved in this controversy is whether or not all students with disabilities, regardless of severity level, should be educated within regular classroom environments – or should a continuum of placement services for students continue to exist. This issue not only has generated a great deal of professional divisiveness but it also has clear policy and professional practice implications for the future.

Public schools today are serving larger numbers of students who possess multiple and severe disabilities than ever before. While there generally has been widespread acclaim among professional advocates and the parents of these students relative to the *success* of these programs, there exists the strong possibility that increasing tensions will develop in future years between these advocates and parents and others who believe that children with *less severe problems* are not being adequately served by the educational system.

Conceivably, programs for students with severe disabilities ultimately could be looked upon as "taking away resources" from programs for other less-disabled students -- students who may be perceived of as possessing *greater potential.* In the year 2000, might we witness another *excellence vs. equity controversy* within the field of education – only this time it would be an unprecedented and indeed a "strange" one -- one which involves an *intra special*

education controversy and competition: the severely disabled competing against the mildly disabled? It could happen!

Education and Overall Human Service System Reform.

One of the major current controversies within the field of special education -- and one which likely will serve as a significant pressure point toward shaping its future -- is concerned with its involvement with broader education and human service system reform movements that are taking place in our nation.

The current administration's educational reform plan, *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, currently under consideration by Congress, would codify into law the six national goals, standards, and basic assessment mechanisms which were included in the previous Bush administration's educational reform plan, *America 2000*. At this time, despite the strong likelihood that *Goals 2000* will become a reality (because of its largely bipartisan support), it remains unclear what its impact will have upon students with disabilities as well upon other high-risk students in our nation's schools.

A major criticism of both *Goals 2000* and its predecessor, *America 2000*, has been that it has not given sufficient attention to the negative consequences which are likely to result for disabled, disadvantaged, and other at-risk students unless accommodations and modifications are allowed (Davis, 1993; Hodgkinson, 1992; Kirst, 1991).

Among the most salient concerns with *America 2000* and its possible negative consequences for disadvantaged students involves its standardized national testing emphasis. The same concern exists

in relationship to *Goals 2000*. Setting high standards for students with disabilities and other at-risk students is admirable. Also, the need for rigorous assessment measures is evident for these populations. However, it is extremely important that students with disabilities and other disadvantages are not unduly penalized in this process. Student *inputs* as well as student outcomes need to be addressed. We must make every effort possible to ensure that all students are presented with ample opportunities to learn, and further that their instructional programs are appropriate and take into consideration their individualized learning and broader personal/social needs.

It is suggested that school psychologists have both an important responsibility and a major opportunity to help policymakers and school personnel regarding the proposed implementation of higher student standards as well as standardized national testing by clarifying many of the delicate, sensitive, and potentially dangerous issues which may be involved within this domain. Of more importance, school psychologists can be of direct help to students with disabilities or other disadvantages and their parents by "protecting" them against possible dangerous consequences if these particular standards and tests are, in fact, implemented and misused.

Another component of the current transition process that the field of special education is undergoing involves its *relationship with compensatory education*. At both the national and state level, plans are being formulated and, in some cases, implemented, to merge many of the programming components of special education, migrant

education, and Chapter I. Departments of education presently are being restructured within several states to allow for a more fluid student identification and student programming process involving students with mild disabilities and those students who traditionally have been identified as *educationally disadvantaged* (those students typically served by Chapter I programs).

Finally, the field of special education, as is the broader field of education, currently finds itself at the core of yet another even more dramatic change process: the large, nation-wide movement to develop a *more integrated and effective overall human service delivery system* for children and families considered to be at risk.

In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in the demand for the development and implementation of a more effective overall human service delivery system for our nation's at-risk children and their families. Policymakers, researchers, program administrators, clinicians, legislators, advocates, and clients alike have become increasingly vocal in their arguments that the current system is woefully inadequate and inefficient -- and that it must be drastically altered or, according to some, replaced with an entirely new system (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1993; Hodgkinson, 1992; Kagan, 1991; Kirst, 1991; Koyanagi & Gaines, 1993; Melaville, Blank, & Asayesh, 1993; Morrill, 1992; Pizzigati, 1993; Schorr, 1989; United States General Accounting Office, 1992; Weissbourd, 1991).

Gough (1991) captured the essence of the major problem facing most schools and educators today: "Until we as a society acknowledge the direct connection between children's lives outside the classroom and their achievement in it -- and then try assiduously

to improve both at once -- we're likely to be left with half a loaf" (p. 571).

Clearly, the cognitive and academic needs of students must continue to be a major responsibility of our nation's public school educators. Yet, changing demographics, conditions, and emerging trends strongly suggest that *new concepts of schooling* also are needed.

As stated by Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990), *schools* should be viewed as only *one* of several educating institutions that simultaneously affect an individual's growth (the *family* and the *community* being the other major institutions) and that remediation cannot be confined to the school alone. A broader view of education presently is being demanded by the realities of today's complex society.

Schools certainly are not the *only* cause of our society's problems although they frequently are the primary whipping boy for the broader ills which are present in America today. However, borrowing a somewhat hackneyed but still likely accurate expression, "schools can be--and *must* be--part of the solution (Davis, 1993).

Schools could serve as a major facilitator of a broad spectrum of services to at-risk children and their families. Some basic shifts in roles and responsibilities will be required, but nevertheless, our nation's schools -- assuming that they are provided with sufficient fiscal and human resources (and, this is a major assumption) could function in a major facilitator role for the organization, collaboration,

and delivery of comprehensive programming services to this population.

Because all children have to attend school, schools are the most accessible, appropriate, and accountable institutions for establishing collaboratives. It is not suggested that our nation's schools should directly deliver mental health and health services to those children in need of them. In fact, given the severe financial and human resource constraints under which many of our schools are currently operating -- as well as because of the skepticism and negative attitudes which some parents and taxpayers already hold about schools -- this may not be a particularly good or effective idea. However, schools are in the "best position" to broker and/or to facilitate these services.

"Grouping a number of services in one place makes it easier to use all of them. Schools can be one hub, but they should not be the only one, and may not be as appropriate in some instances as child-care centers, churches, or other institutions. In some cities parents perceive schools as hostile places and feel more comfortable with other community institutions" (Kirst, 1991, p. 617).

In recent years educators have become increasingly aware of the multiple and complex problems faced by growing numbers of their students. They recognize that many of their students' problems are directly connected to those of their families and their communities. As a result, many educators have been eager to form partnerships with other human service providers in an effort to develop a more integrated and effective overall service delivery system. While some educators continue to resist these approaches,

the development of school-linked human service delivery models are growing in popularity throughout our nation (Gardner, 1992; Levy & Shepardson, 1992).

The planning and implementation of effective school-linked services, however, is a complex and formidable task. While school-linked service delivery models hold considerable promise, in order to ensure their success, several key issues need to be addressed -- some of which involve technical items, and others, political/policy concerns. Governance and funding issues need to be resolved. Target populations must be specifically determined. Major questions such as the following will need to be asked: Which specific services will be offered -- and by whom? Who will be responsible for service delivery? Who will be ultimately accountable

Students with Learning Disabilities.

We can anticipate that the entire *learning disabilities* category will undergo careful scrutiny in coming years. The fact that 2.1 million students (49 percent of all special education students) currently are classified within this category demands that this occur. The identification of such large numbers of students as *learning disabled* consistently has raised questions relative to precise definition, criteria for inclusion, and the actual need for special instructional interventions for this subset of children and youth.

Again, issues of *equity*, *need*, and *appropriateness* arise with this group of students, especially in light of the increasing needs being manifested in our schools by non-special education students. Are many of these students, for example, especially those considered

to be *mildly* learning disabled, really in need of a modified instructional program and other support services? Has this category become a convenient "dumping ground" for too many students whose instructional needs, in actuality, should be able to be fully accommodated by regular class teachers without any special "attention"?

Do many of these students possess other disabilities but are being mis-identified as learning disabled because this particular category generally is considered to have a less stigmatizing label? And finally, are some students who possess more severe disabilities being denied the intensity of the instructional services which they need because too many resources are being drained off by other students who are being mis-classified as *learning disabled*?

As the pressures upon schools continue to increase in the future to meet the needs of the expected influx of a more diverse and complex student population, the category of specific learning disabilities very likely will undergo some major changes in terms of "appropriate definition", validity and reliability of identification criteria, and the need for special instructional services.

Students with Serious Emotional Disturbance.

One of the most controversial issues currently receiving attention within the special education and mental health fields involves students with emotional/behavioral impairments. This is a complex issue which includes two major dimensions.

First, there is widespread concern that children and youth who have emotional/behavioral deficits are being substantially *under-*

identified by schools, and even in those cases when they *are* identified, they are *not receiving appropriate programs* (Knitzer, Steinberg, & Fleisch, 1990; Koyanagi & Gaines, 1993).

According to the most recent data available (*Fourteenth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act*, 1992) only about *one percent* of our nation's school-age population of children and youth are receiving instructional and related services under the *serious emotional disturbance* category. This percentage of students served is substantially below what several prevalence estimates are for this specific population, ranging from *three percent* to *ten percent* or higher (Knitzer, Steinberg, & Fleisch, 1990; Koyangai & Gaines, 1993).

The results of a recent comprehensive study involving students with serious emotional disturbance also confirmed what many educators and school psychologists have long suspected about this specific population: (1) of all students with disabilities, SED students have the greatest difficulty in achieving academically, as evidenced by grade point average (1.7 GPA vs. 2.0 GPA); and (2) students with *serious emotional disturbance* are far more likely to drop-out of school (50%) than other students with disabilities (32.5%), and their graduation rate is lower than that of other students with disabilities (42% vs. 56.1%) (SRI International, 1991)

Second, considerable controversy surrounds the current statutory category of *serious emotional disturbance*. Several advocacy groups such as the National Mental Health Association (NMHA) and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) are strongly in favor of changing this category to *emotional or behavioral disorder*.

However, other groups, such as the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE), and the National School Boards Association (NSBA) are strongly opposed to changing the current definition (*The Special Educator*, May 25, 1993).

As required in the 1992 reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act, the U.S. Department of Education asked for public comment on whether Congress should change the term and definition of serious emotional disturbance. Under the proposal submitted by a coalition of special education and mental health advocates (NMHA, CEC, and other groups) in addition to the term being changed to *emotional or behavioral disorder*, it is being requested that the definition include the phrase *"sustained disorder of conduct."*

The coalition argues that the current definition excludes many children and youth who are need of special education instructional and related mental health services but who are not able to receive them. The current definition, for example, excludes children who are considered to be socially maladjusted. The broadened wording contained in the coalition's proposed definition, however, has become a major source of concern for many special education administrators and other school officials.

Their concern involves their contention that it is difficult to distinguish between a *conduct disorder* (which many view as not constituting a *true disability*) and a *behavior disorder*, and should students with conduct disorders be covered under federal special education law, it would be extremely difficult (for school administrators) to address these students with disciplinary action, including, as necessary, suspension or expulsion (Ficklen, 1993).

Certainly, many school psychologists already have played a major role in shaping this controversial debate. The issues are extremely important and they have serious implications for the future. The emotional and behavioral needs of children and youth have been sorely neglected in our schools and in our society. The expertise, professional judgments, and advocacy of school psychologists never have been as critically needed as they are now regarding the appropriate identification of and the most effective programming for students with emotional/behavioral needs.

Impact Upon School Psychologists and Recommended Strategies

The issues, controversies, and trends identified in the previous section of this paper represent only a sampling of those which are likely to have a substantial impact upon the future roles and responsibilities of school psychologists. Clearly, several other issues and controversies within the current field of special education involve school psychologists -- and they too are likely to have varying degrees of impact upon their future professional roles and responsibilities.

In particular, the field is continuing to struggle with the entire *attention deficit disorder* category. The basic point of contention surrounding *attention deficit disorder* has been whether or not students with this disorder should be treated as a separate and distinct category under federal and state special education law. Presently, very vocal parent advocacy groups, as well as many professionals, are working diligently to effect this change at both the

national and state level. The services of school psychologists within this controversy predictably will be called upon to an even greater extent in the future.

Another current development within the special education field which is producing controversy -- and one which is likely to require the increased involvement of school psychologists in the future is the rapidly increasing use of *assistive technology* as an instructional tool. In particular, the employment of *facilitated communication* strategies with children with autism and severe mental retardation currently is receiving considerable attention.

The period of transition which the field of special education is presently experiencing is posing many challenges for school psychologists. They are being asked to assume modified and, in some cases, entirely new roles and responsibilities. As the field of special education continues to struggle with many of its own professional assumptions, belief systems, policies, and practices, it is suggested that so will (must) school psychology with respect to its relationship to special education.

School psychologists can (must) play a major role in the development of an effective overall human service delivery system for at-risk children and families in our nation. The need for a comprehensive, integrated, and efficient system which will be fully responsive to the complex and changing needs of our most vulnerable children and families is urgent. School psychologists have both a professional responsibility and also a major opportunity to use their expertise to help create a human service system that ensures positive outcomes for its consumers. In particular, they can help

educators sort out many of the critical issues involving the often complex relationships between students identified as having "traditional disabilities" and those students who "do not qualify for special education services" but who still are considered to be "at-risk."

First, school psychologists must continue in their efforts to expand their upon their particular domain's knowledge base by conducting and/or reviewing relevant research involving students with disabilities and other at-risk children. Second, they must be prepared and willing to share their knowledge and research findings with professionals from other disciplines who are also involved with these students -- especially as efforts intensify to develop a more comprehensive and effective human service delivery system. Third, school psychologists can help ensure the success of this process by making a concerted effort to present their findings and professional observations in such a manner that they are readily understood by non-psychologists -- most certainly including the target populations of the overall collaboration process.

School psychologists also can help in other ways. They should be willing to participate in cross-training programs, both preservice and inservice, with other professionals who are involved with vulnerable children and families. At the same time school psychologists should demand that, as part of their own discipline's professional preparation programs, they are provided with substantial opportunities to develop broad-based skills involving roles, responsibilities, and general knowledge bases of other human

service disciplines. Specific training in the *collaboration process* is a necessity.

As the relationship between special education and regular education in our nation's schools becomes more closely interwoven in terms of responsibility for serving students with disabilities and disadvantages, school psychologists in the future likely will be required to serve a much broader population of students than that with which many of them have become accustomed. For example, it is suggested that the responsibilities of future school psychologists will no longer be as restricted to "special education students" and "special education policies and practices" as they, to a large extent, are presently. Rather, school psychologists will find themselves much more directly involved with broader student populations, e.g., those students who traditionally have been assigned to compensatory education programs such as Chapter I and migrant programs.

The one specific area in which school psychologists can be of most immediate assistance, however, involves the current controversy surrounding *serious emotional disturbance*. The mental health and behavioral needs of large numbers of today's children and youth are being sorely neglected in our schools and in our society. It is imperative that school psychologists not only provide their expertise to help clarify many of the issues surrounding the appropriate identification of and programming for these students but also they must assume a strong advocacy role in their behalf.

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